Tracing the Footsteps of First Vestal Virgin

History of the Days Before Romulus, When the Vestals First Carried Water in the Sieves to Test Their Goodness, to Be Revealed in New Discoveries That Uncover the Strange Customs of the Bronze Age

HIDDEN in a recent announcement from the Royal Italian Administration of Antiquities, devoted to the interesting results of new excavations in the vicinity of Rome, there is a short sentence which is almost startling.

"Among these ruins," the bulletin reads in its description of discoveries on a little hill a few miles from Rome, "there seems to be no doubt the first of the Vestal Virgins once observed her devotions and exerted her influence over the affairs of a people who had built a great city on the site long before the coming of Romulus. In fact the footsteps of the first of the Vestals may soon be almost completely disclosed."

"To walk again in the footsteps of the first Vestal Virgin!"

Can there be a more fascinating promise held out to those who are watching these new excavations among the secrets buried in the soil of Italy? The Vestal Virgin always will be one of the most romantic institutions of ancient Rome. More than priestess, more than stateswoman, indeed a demi-goddess, she has remained through all the centuries the epitome of all that is gentle and splendid in the nobleness of woman.

While the vices and the intrigues of ancient Rome disturb our admiration for the greatness of the people who built the foundations of our modern civilization, we have learned to look back upon the Vestals with wonder and an almost sentimental regard.

Their origin always has been in doubt. Legend has placed them as a Grecian institution of the gods, brought to the banks of the River Tiber in the train of Hercules and Mars when those two gods wandered thus far afield. The first of which there is tradition was Sylvia, daughter of a legendary king of a tribe of descendants from the refugees of Troy. She was the priestess of the first Temple of Vesta, built not long before Romulus, according to beliefs up to this time, founded the city of Rome.

Now it appears there were Vestals on the Tiber before Sylvia, and that, indeed, there was a city of Rome before the coming of Romulus.

How Chance Played Part In the New Excavations

The new excavations have been made at the summit of the hill Monte Mario, just outside Rome proper. There has stood for many years a small rambling village on this hill. Recently it was decided by a new purchaser of the property covered by the village to erect modern buildings. While the workmen were digging up the old foundations they suddenly came upon the ruins of an old wall. The Government promptly was notified, and the Administration of Antiquities at once sent representatives to examine the ruins. They were seen to be of an age reaching back much further than any ruins unearthed in the vicinity of the city.

The Government took charge of the property and began an official excavation. It was not long before there were signs that this hill marked the northwest extremities of a city built as far back as the Bronze Age—long before the Iron Age, which is marked by the oldest relics so far discovered.

To historians it came as a shock, this indication that Rome existed before Romulus. The legends which tell of a time preceding Romulus speak of the people of Janus, the son of Apollo, who lived near the Tiber and ruled over a race of people who were simple and pure, even though rude and uncultured. Of these, however, there has been no trace.

The secrets of the earth that have been revealed have all marked the progress of the descendants of the residents of the Seven Hills who began with Romulus and through the succeeding dynasties of the Cæsars built their temples and expanded the city.

Now, however, there is promise that we shall soon be able to construct a mental picture of a time before this—of a civilization that existed in the Bronze Age, that had laws very much similar to ours of today, and who already had their Vestals whom they slew if, when one was suspected, she could not successfully dip water from the Tiber in a sieve and hold it aloft—not a single drop running through.

All through our known history of ancient Rome the stories of the Vestals of each period are intermingled with the accounts of the activities of the Cæsars. These accounts begin with that still legendary time of Sylvia.

This Sylvia was the heroine of the first tragic romance of which there seems to be a record—that is, a record which despite its vagueness and its mythological trimmings seems nevertheless to have been founded upon a tangible fact.

Her father was one of the twelve legendary Kings who preceded Romulus—Kings who ruled over the descendants of the refugees from Troy. Her uncle, Amulius, coveted the throne and, slaying her father, captured Sylvia and, as the legend goes, "made her a Vestal, building a temple for her to preside over."

Doomed to Serve State And to Forego Love

As Vestal Virgin, Sylvia was doomed to many years of duties to the State, during which she could neither listen to proposals of love nor marry. It was her duty to keep burning the sacred fire in the temple. She was, it is supposed, one of six—sometimes there were nine. Each of the Vestals had slaves set apart for her; she was allowed the privilege of appearing in the streets uncovered—a privilege denied other women; she was given other privileges which were shared only by the King. Her counsels were listened to in all affairs of State—she was the symbol of the purity and pride of the women of her time.

But to Sylvia there came a temptation, according to the legend, in the form of none other than the noble Mars, god of war. Mars, it is said, saw her one day while he was resting on the banks of the Tiber. Her grace and loveliness attracted him. He wooed her with all the impetuousness every soldier is supposed to display in a similar situation. He promised the frightened guardian of the sacred fire divine children if she would listen to him with favor.

When it was learned that Sylvia had listened to the god she was denounced and it was ordered that she be "put to the test." This meant that the beautiful Sylvia had to walk down to the edge of the Tiber and lift its water above her head in a sieve. The water ran through—so her doom was pronounced. She was put to death and burned, and her ashes were sprinkled over the sacred fire she had defiled.

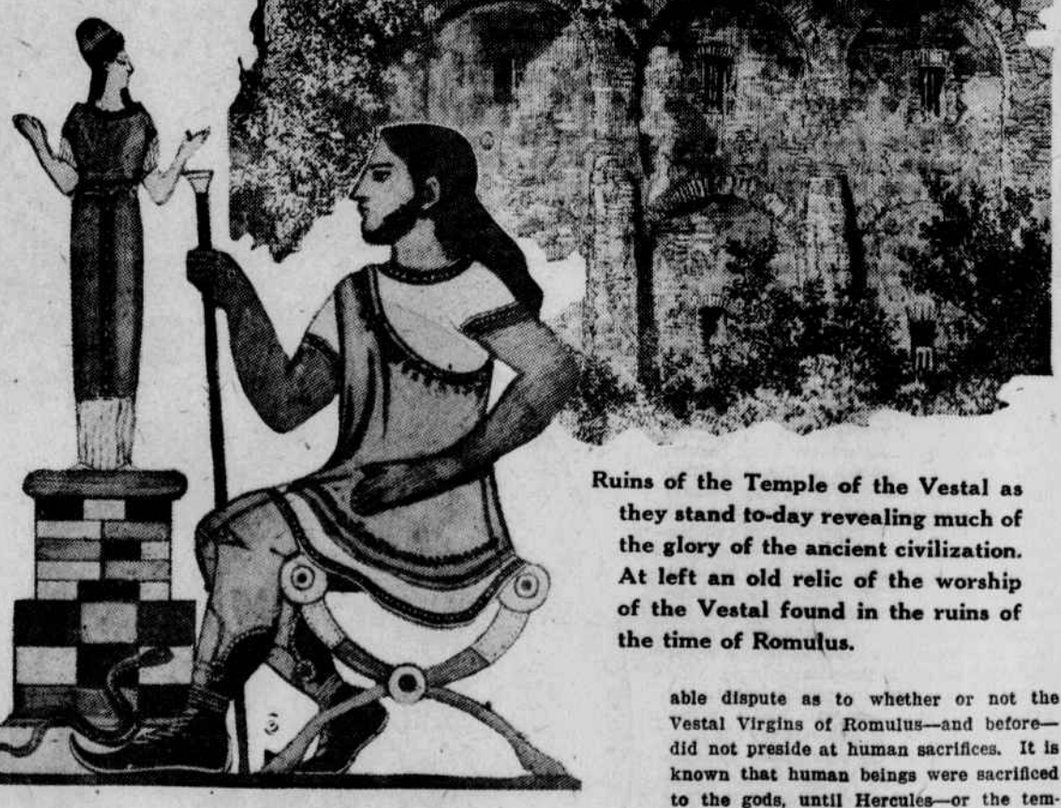
The two sons of Sylvia, twins, were, according to the custom, thrown into the river. The legend continues that Mars watched over them and caused them to float harmlessly to the foot of a big tree which grew at the bottom of what now is the Palatine Hill. Here he caused a she wolf to rescue them. A statue representing these two boys being nursed by this wolf was found near the base of the Palatine Hill, a souvenir of an early Roman sculptor who, perhaps, lived not long after Sylvia's time.

Nothing Found Until Now That Antedated Romulus

One of these boys became the Romulus, who, according to tradition, later founded the city of Rome. Of his time there is a trace—ruins that date back to him have been uncovered. But beyond him there has been nothing known—until these new excavations at Monte Mario.

Already there has been uncovered an inclosed chamber, on the walls of which some primitive people older than Rome had painted with vegetable stains figures representing themselves in various attitudes of worship and industry. One of these shows three male figures, scantily clad, approaching the figure of a woman covered by a diaphanous drapery.

The famous painting of Leroux, "The Test of the "Vestal Virgin." It depicts a vestal before the temple in ancient Rome proving her honor by holding water in a sieve.



Ruins of the Temple of the Vestal as they stand to-day revealing much of the glory of the ancient civilization. At left an old relic of the worship of the Vestal found in the ruins of the time of Romulus.

The woman, evidently young and pleasing, seems to be a Vestal. She stands majestically while the men approach in attitudes that suggest humility. This is held to be a certain indication that there were Vestal Virgins before Sylvia, and if this be true, as it undoubtedly is, the footsteps of these first Vestals surely will be traced and the records of an unknown civilization opened up to us.

Only Women of Prominence And Trusted Implicitly

It will indeed be interesting to know the origin of this custom of nominating a group of young women, dedicating them to the State and giving into their charge the sacred fire. They were virtually the only women who were given prominence; they were considered wise enough to give advice to the Kings at a time when women were looked upon merely as playthings. They were trusted implicitly and allowed the freedom of the cities and the countryside at a time when other women were closely watched and never allowed out of sight of their masters' most trusted slaves or attendants. They were the most beautiful women in the kingdom, always young and charming of manner—and yet there are but few records of a Vestal Virgin offending as did Sylvia.

It always has been a matter of considerable dispute as to whether or not the Vestal Virgins of Romulus—and before—did not preside at human sacrifices. It is known that human beings were sacrificed to the gods, until Hercules—or the temporal King whose identity has been confused with that of the god—halted the custom. In the rites exercised by the later Vestals there was much to indicate that originally it was these gentle young women who wielded the knife with which the human beings set aside for sacrifice to an angry god were butchered. It has been so unbelievable, however, that authorities have been hesitant at accepting this as true.

Ceremony of the Cæsars Relic of Sacrificial Time

In the later records it is shown that the Vestals of the Cæsars in presiding over feasts usually laid the blade of a sharp stone or a knife on the forehead of a priest about to be ordained to the service of one of the gods. This is thought to be a survival of a time when the Vestals presided at a sacrifice of human life. This is one of the interesting points it is thought will now be cleared up, for the new ruins go back to the time of Hercules and the halting of human sacrifice by the gods, and even beyond, and it is hoped some sculpture or carving will be found in which a sacrifice of that age will be depicted.

Janus, the god who, according to tradition, first came to the western shores of Italy and brought with him the first peoples of that district, may now be found to have been a very human being and, really, the actual founder of Rome. If this proves to be the result of the new discoveries then there will be unfolded no doubt a complete picture of the peoples who lived long beyond the time marked by even the oldest of the legends of the gods.

It was during the time of Romulus that religion was supposed to have been "invented." Ruins have been found, thought to be the remnant of the first temple built in Rome, where the people were taught to worship after a definite plan.

Sylvia had been made a Vestal by her uncle, and the sacred fire had been created by him, the present legends run, but still there is no record of a definite, organized religion until Romulus built the temple and dedicated it to Saturn. It was Romulus too who established the "sacred wood" where Aphrodite reigned, and it was he who captured the women of the peoples who lived outside his city and brought them within the walls to be divided among his soldiers, so that his new State might grow.

Of these times we have only fragmentary knowledge. It is certain they will be more fully revealed by the new explorations.

So far as is known there is no recovered statue or carving which depicts the Vestal Virgin in any detail. There are several paintings on the walls at Pompeii and on other ruins which suggest her presence or her influence, but no ancient sculptor from Romulus down seems to have dared to make of her a model.

The discovery of the carving in the ruins at Monte Mario, in which a woman is shown receiving worshipers, will be of the greatest importance if, after further study, it is definitely decided that this actually represents a Vestal of the days before Romulus.

Other Interesting Discoveries Made Since War Ended

Other excavations of the last year in Italy have produced many other interesting discoveries. Principal of these were conducted under the site of the former German Embassy in the heart of the city. This building directly after the war was torn down that certain indications beneath it thought to be the ruins of an ancient temple might be investigated.

The ensuing excavations early disclosed the ruins of ancient walls, and before long it was seen that the excavators were uncovering a temple to Jupiter, built immediately after Romulus. The foundation walls are well preserved. They are built of thin blocks of a volcanic stone, and there are signs that they withstood the improvements made on the upper part of the temple by several succeeding dynasties.

At Anzio, the ancient Antium, with a famous temple sacred to Fortune, one of the favorite resorts of Nero, there has recently come to light, in the remains of the villa of that Emperor, the fragments, brought as rubbish from elsewhere, of a calendar painted on the white plaster of a wall in black and red. More than 300 small pieces were carefully put together, and the result has been that we have before us the only Roman calendar known before its reform by Julius Cæsar in 46 B. C.

It has thirteen months instead of twelve, the extra month of twenty-seven days called Mer(kedonius) being intercalated in alternate years to make up the lunar year of 355 days to the length of the solar year. Only twenty-two or twenty-three days were actually added, for four or five days were taken off February.

The nundinal or market days and the festivals of the various deities are carefully noted in this calendar, which is thus of the highest interest.

The famous subterranean basilica just outside the Porta Maggiore, which was found under the railway line just outside the main station during the war, has provided one of the greatest surprises; and not far off another interesting underground building has come to light. It is of a very different character, being certainly a tomb, and in all probability Christian. It is decorated with a series of interesting paintings, the interpretation of which is by no means certain.

It is not improbable, however, that we have here representations of St. Peter and St. Paul belonging to the beginning of the third century B. C.—the earliest painted portraits of them, that is, that have come down to us—together with the rest of the Twelve Apostles, one of whom has been made to give place to St. Paul.

Above the full length figures are scenes of various import and of difficult interpretation. In the upper part of one of them we see a number of domestic animals—cattle, asses, horses and goats, with small houses on the right and left, and a woman by a fountain near the latter. On the lower level three nude figures approach a large loom; on the other side stands a woman, turning toward a man seated on the ground, who seems to be speaking to her. The significance of this scene still has to be determined.

Great Wall of China Fast Crumbling Away

AN examination of the bricks and mortar in the Great Wall of China was made at Shan-hai-kwan by a chemist attached to the Bureau of Science at Manila. He reports that the bricks are so weak that pieces may be broken off with the fingers.

They are much larger than ordinary building bricks, gray in color, and resemble pumice somewhat in structure. The mortar which is pure white under the exposed surface, is much stronger than the bricks. The tradition that the bricks were dried in the sun only has been confirmed by laboratory tests. If they had been dried in a kiln the appearance of the wall would have been considerably different and its strength and durability would have been much greater.

The general appearance and analysis of the mortar indicate that no sand was mixed with the lime.

THE sheep shearing contest, an annual event at the Agricultural College of the Ohio State University, is thought to be the only function of the kind held anywhere in this country.

Simultaneously with the starter's word the competitors in the opening contest close their shears as one man and bend to the work of removing the fleeces in the shortest time possible. In the tense moments no sound is heard but the rapid clip, clip of the shears and an occasional restless movement in the large crowd of spectators in the amphitheater.

In a few minutes the first undressed sheep is set free. The other clipped sheep are turned out in rapid succession. After each contestant has sheared two animals and tied up his fleeces the judges make their decision. The various factors entering into the determination of the final score make the speed of shearing relatively unimportant. Emphasis is laid on the correct and humane methods of handling and shearing sheep and the proper tying of wool.

Individual timekeepers keep accurate count of each contestant, and the judges, well known flock masters and sheep men, grade each man on the handling of the animal, his use of the shears and the character and preparation of the fleece.

It is said that American sheep men are not only the most skillful of all handlers of sheep but that they are the most humane as well.

ALTHOUGH taller than an ordinary horse, weighing more than half a ton, and aderned with widespreading antlers, the bull moose stalks with ghostly silence through the thickest forests, where man can scarcely move without being betrayed by the loud crackling of dry twigs

In summer the moose loves low lying, swampy forests, interspersed with shallow lakes and sluggish streams. In such places it often wades up to its neck in a lake to feed on succulent water plants, and when reaching to the bottom becomes entirely submerged. These visits to the water are sometimes by day, but usually by night, especially during the season when the calves are young and the horns of the bulls are but partly grown.

Late in the autumn, with full grown antlers, the bulls wander through the forests looking for their mates, at times uttering far reaching cries and calls of defiance to their rivals, and occasionally clashing their horns against the saplings in the exuberance of masterful vigor. Other bulls at times accept the challenge, and hasten to meet the rival for a battle royal. At this season the call of the cow moose also brings the nearest bulls quickly to her side. Hunters take advantage of this, and by imitating the call through a birchbark trumpet bring the most aggressive bulls down.